
Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age

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Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age

by Cristina Archetti

Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate that a greater understanding of communication in the 21st century is essential to more effective counterterrorism. In fact, while “strategic communication” and “narratives” are advocated by many analysts as essential weapons in countering extremism, few seem to truly understand the reality of the digital-age information environment where such tools need to be deployed. To contribute to bridging this gap, the article outlines some problematic misunderstandings of the contemporary information environment, provides an alternative communication-based framework to explain radicalization, and draws some counterintuitive lessons for tackling terrorism.

Keywords: communication; media; radicalization; narratives; terrorism.

Introduction

Since 9/11 much has been said about the role of technologies like the Internet and global communication networks in sustaining transnational terrorism, the spread of its ideology, and its recruiting activities. Many claims have also been made about the role of the media, particularly new communication technologies, in fostering the process of radicalization—the embracing of extremist views, which might manifest themselves in the form of terrorist violence [1]. There is a widespread realization that communication is crucial to terrorism, to the point that “strategic communication” has become a buzzword in official circles, think tanks and academia [2]. The notion of “narrative,” in particular, has increasingly been drawn into the analysis of the roots of terrorism and is now advocated as an essential part of counter-radicalization responses [3]. Even official documents suggest that “we” should rewrite the “narrative” of grievances, which is promoted by terrorists to enlist new followers into their ranks, in order to ideologically counter the terrorist threat [4]. Despite its centrality, however, there has been very little effort to establish an analytical framework that rigorously and comprehensively explains the role of communication in the development of violent extremism.

This article is part of a broader research agenda that aims to bring communication closer to the centre of our approach to contemporary extremism [5]. Within its self-contained scope, it shows that a greater understanding of communication in the 21st century can be the basis for a more realistic explanation of radicalization than current suggestions of contagion-like processes based on the spread of a radical ideology [6]. To do so, the article first outlines four crucial misunderstandings that characterize current communication approaches to countering terrorism. Second, it provides an alternative, communication-based explanation for the phenomenon of radicalization. This is the basis, in the third part of the article, to dispel some myths about the role of communication technologies and the media in the process of radicalization. Further practical lessons that can be applied to counterterrorism are drawn in the fourth section, before the conclusion.

Limitations of Current Approaches

The main shortcoming of strategic communication approaches to countering terrorism lies in assuming that the information space in the digital age is far simpler and more linear than it actually is. To start with, from reports on how to counter “online radicalization” [7] to governments’ calls for taking ‘extremist material off the Internet’ [8], there is a strong focus on “messaging.” Whether this means fighting the terrorists with the “right” counter-message or removing “their” extremist message, this approach reflects a woefully outdated model of public-media interactions. Such a model—often referred to as the “hypodermic needle” model of communication—was developed in the aftermath of World War I, i.e. nearly a century ago, at a time when the winners of the armed conflict believed they had triumphed at least in part thanks to the persuasive powers of propaganda [9]. The model was elaborated in the attempt to explain how propaganda messages had affected the morale of enemy soldiers. It assumes that the public is passive and that different members of an audience tend to change attitudes and behaviour in a similar way upon reception—or injection/inoculation, continuing with the hypodermic needle metaphor—of the same media message.

The reality of communication processes, however, could not be more different. The fact that the model is simplistic and naïve at best is not only proven by the fact that, as we can all realize in the immediacy of our everyday lives, we do not buy every commodity advertising messages tell us to buy. As a range of subsequent communication theories have pointed out [10], audiences are active both in the selection of the information they pay attention to—they do not consume all the information that is “out there”—and in the interpretation of media texts. This means that the *availability* of a message—for instance a jihadi video being online—does not necessarily equate *reach*, that is, such message actually being accessed and consumed (e.g. a jihadi video, among the estimated 6 billion hours of footage watched on *YouTube* alone every month, actually being payed attention to) [11]. This, in turn, does not at all mean *impact*—the message having the desired effect (i.e. getting any viewer radicalized, or terrorized, depending on the audience being targeted by a terrorist). As a further demonstration of these points, most readers of this article will have been exposed to some form of radical message from extremists, yet not turned into radicals. In fact, watching a jihadi video might even increase a counterterrorist’s resolve against extremism—an opposite effect then originally intended by the producer of that message.

In addition to this, strategic communication approaches to counterterrorism tend to demonize the Internet and social media needlessly. For some, the Internet is the very reason al Qaeda—while the average lifespan of 90 per cent of terrorist groups is shorter than one year—has managed to survive for more than two decades [12]. For others, the possibility new media offer to extremists to lurk in the dark alleys of cyberspace is even regarded as the main *cause* of radicalization [13]. Indeed, the Internet and social media are widely blamed for ISIS recruitment among Western audiences [14]. Such views are simplistic in their *technological determinism*—the belief that a technology, due to its mere existence, must produce certain effects. They overlook the fact that it is always humans (governments, citizens and extremists among them) who *use* technology as a tool to advance their own goals and that audiences, as already indicted, actively select and embrace—rather than merely absorb—messages they are interested in. In reality, although the phenomenon of Western fighters joining ISIS is described as ‘unprecedented’ [15], we need only to look back at history to find that this is not the case. The Spanish civil war (1936-39), for instance, attracted volunteer foreign fighters in much higher numbers: on the Franco nationalist side alone there were 8,000 Portuguese, 700 Irish, 250 French, 78,000 Moroccans, just to name some of the nationalities involved [16]. On the Republican side, the biggest national contingent of the International Brigades was French with 8,500 combatants, but involved many more volunteers from as far away as Brazil, and China [17]. Among them was also the British writer George Orwell. We can further think of the over 210,000 Irish volunteers who fought with the British in WWI [18].

While recruitment propaganda [19] was a contributing factor to the enlisting of volunteers in past conflicts—showing that the Internet is really no more effective than the old-fashioned poster—we do not tend to dismiss those war volunteers’ motivations [20] for joining foreign conflicts as the mere effect of “brainwashing” [21].

Negative assessments of the role of the Internet and social media are also based on a lack of historical perspective. What we might see as an unprecedented “communication revolution” is barely the latest manifestation of those profound changes that the introduction of *any* communication technology, from the invention of parchment, to the printing press and the telegraph, has always contributed to across the centuries. The first instantaneous and global communication technology—the telegraph (not the Internet!)—for example, supported the establishment of colonial empires by enabling the effective and timely administration of distant lands. The telegraph, like the Internet of today, was associated in Victorian times with growing social ills, particularly with offering novel opportunities to criminals for fraud and deception [22]. The alarmed attitudes towards the “dangers” of Internet and social media—emerging platforms whose effects some appear not to fully comprehend—is thus not new when we look at the reactions by those who witnessed advances in communications in the past. In addition, the Internet might be “new” to security experts, but its effects on politics and society have been studied and debated for over twenty years in the fields of Political Communication, International Communication, and Communication Studies. It is perhaps a matter for counterterrorism practitioners to look a bit further into multidisciplinary territory for advice. The not unjustified, but certainly disproportionate, focus on the Internet prevents us from seeing the wider social—and never online-only—space in which extremism is rooted. In this respect, rather than focusing on the technology alone, it is more helpful to look at the convergence of different platforms, both “new” and “old” media, and at how they are used by political actors (terrorists, citizens, NGOs, governments and others) for advancing their own agendas.

A last limitation of current strategic communication efforts against extremism relates to the understanding of narratives as simple “messages” or “stories.” The idea here is that, if Western governments craft the “right” narrative and this is received by extremists, they will stop committing acts of terrorism. Narratives, however, are much more than rhetorical devices. Far from being “just stories,” they have deep roots: they are *socially constructed* [23]. In other words, narratives arise from a specific constellation of relationships—a social network [24]. It is possible, in fact, to say that where there is a narrative there must be a network. The reason is that a narrative does not exist in a void. It exists because the story it embodies is told and continuously retold by the people who belong to that network. Understanding this is important: sending a “narrative” into the information environment (as some current approaches in fact aim to do) without there being a network to convey it and re-convey it could be compared to sending a message into outer space. What must be kept in mind is that narratives are not merely the product of words, but of *social practices*.

The next section, in line with the above, examines the social construction of narratives, particularly how the connection between social networks, communication and extremism can be explained.

Explaining Extremism

As this author has argued elsewhere in greater detail, the phenomenon of violent extremism takes place in a social world that is constituted by overlapping networks of relationships [25].

In examining narratives, a distinction should be made between *individual narratives* and *collective narratives*. An individual narrative consists of a person’s understanding of the world and one’s role in it. As illustrated more specifically in Figure 1, an individual’s identity (“who we are”) is shaped by the network of relationships he or she is enmeshed in at any given moment. Communication technologies have a role

in extending such relationships beyond the realm of face-to-face interactions. Craig Calhoun [26], in this respect, argues that the proliferation of ‘indirect relationships’ is a feature that fundamentally characterizes modernity. Beyond direct interpersonal relations, Calhoun envisages indirect personal connections that can exist, for instance, with political representatives, TV personalities, but also through upheld traditions [27]. Communication technologies, in this respect, can further extend our social reach in forming both direct relationships (through emails, for example, or by having a chat over the phone) and in building indirect relationships. For instance, an activist can develop an indirect relationship with an admired political figure (e.g. a terrorist leader) one comes to know through speeches available online. In this sense relationships can be *imagined*.

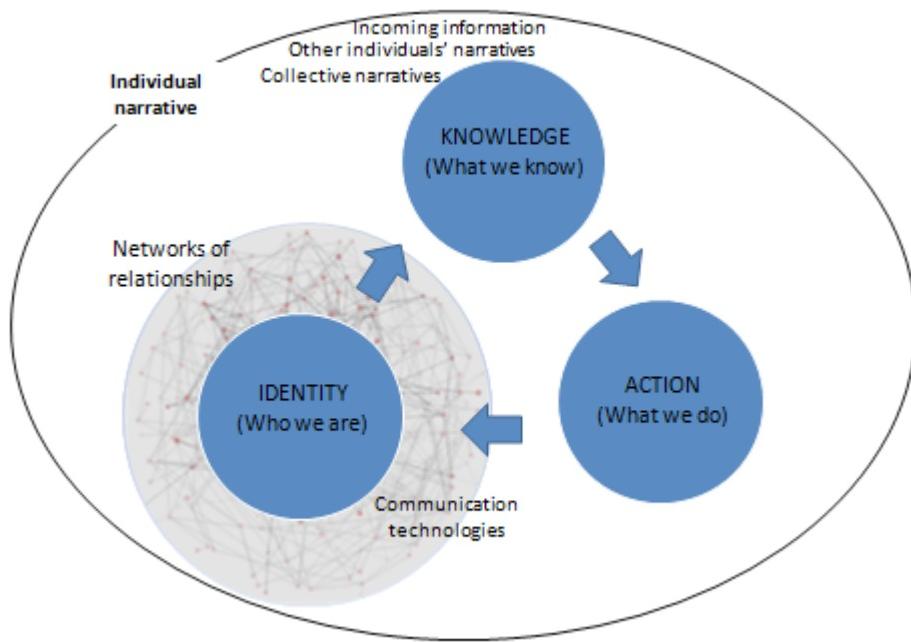


Figure 1: The social construction of the individual narrative

‘Imagined communities,’ to borrow the concept introduced by Benedict Anderson in his discussion of nationalism [28], are based on the ‘politics of identification’ [29]. As Calhoun explains: ‘People without direct interpersonal relations with each other are led by the mediation of the world of political symbols to imagine themselves as members of communities defined by common ascriptive characteristics, personal tastes, habits, concerns’ [30]. They are ‘imagined’ because they are based on ‘categorical identities.’ In this respect, there can be imagined communities of interest like those constituted by environmental activists, gay marriage campaigners, or radical Muslims who aspire to live in a society regulated by Sharia law.

Face-to-face communication and communication technologies, together with media coverage, however, occupy another place on the social map (*‘incoming information’*, in the upper part of Figure 1). They allow the acquisition of new information (through conversation, surfing on the Internet, reading the newspaper, watching TV, etc.), which will be interpreted through the relational perspective occupied by the individual at any specific time. It is at this point that an individual can come into contact with other narratives. These might be other actors’ individual narratives (belonging to our friends and acquaintances, for instance), but also collective narratives (related to the sense of belonging to a democratic society, for example, or sustained by the traditions of an ethnic minority or the rituals of a religious group). The collective narratives might be promoted, as in the case of political movements (or terrorist organisations), for specific mobilization

purposes. I will come back to this in a moment in discussing collective narratives.

Any incoming information, including other actors' narratives, will never be absorbed as it is but will be filtered and *appropriated* through the prism of the individual own narrative. This might, over time, lead to a transformation in the vision of the world of the individual, reflected in his/her changing patterns of social relationships, development of a revised identity, individual narrative, behaviour, and so forth—in a continuing cycle. Partly as a result of our action, partly as the outcome of the simultaneous action by all the actors within our networks, the relationships' maps are constantly changing. This leads to our identity being continuously evolving, together with the way we interpret the world around us and the way we act. Such evolution of our interpretation also includes a continuous reworking of the past, as well as of our projections of future action trajectories [31].

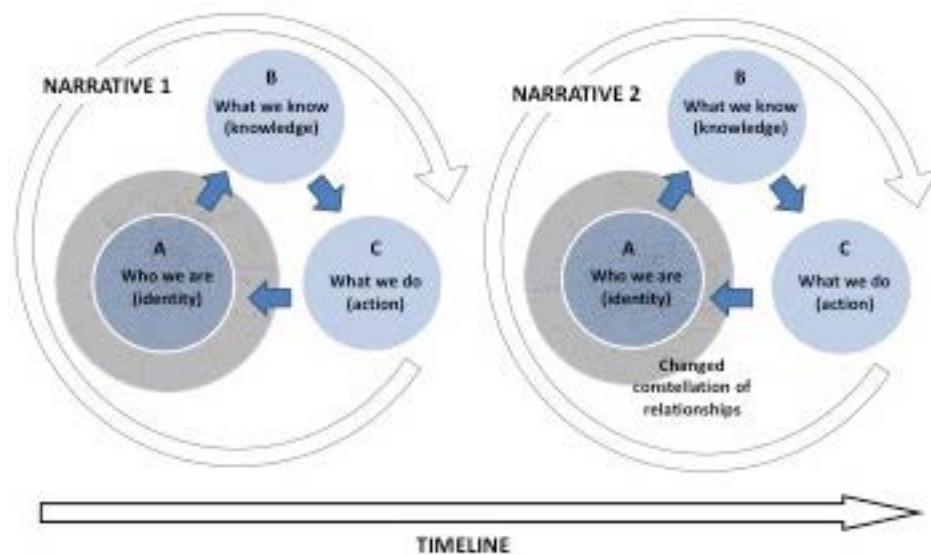


Figure 2: Evolution of the individual narrative over time

This is reflected in a continuously and progressively changing individual narrative. Figure 2 shows the way in which different networks lead to different identities, interpretations of the world, and consequent behaviour.

As identities exist at both individual and collective levels, so do narratives. In this perspective, according to Alberto Melucci, social movements (and also terrorist groups) 'offer individuals the collective possibility of affirming themselves as actors and of finding an equilibrium between self-recognition and hetero-recognition' [32]. Whether an individual will join an extremist group depends on the compatibility between the individual's own narrative and the one of the group. In Figure 3, for example, individuals 1 and 3, as a result of their specific and unique constellation of relationships at that given time, can see themselves as belonging to, and having a role in, an extremist group. They might be individuals living in completely different parts of the world. One might live in the Middle East and have a network of like-minded individuals he or she meets regularly. The other might be a British citizen who, mainly through the Internet, has developed contacts and imagined relationships with individuals he or she might have never met. In this sense, it is interesting to note that this individual actor, often referred to as "lone wolf," is not alone at all in his/her mind. Individual 2 (perhaps one of the readers of this article), due to his/her different network of relationships, cannot envisage a role within an extremist group. These configurations, however, given that networks of relationships continuously evolve, might change over time. Perhaps, as a result of a shift in his/her network of relationships, Individual 1 will leave the extremist group at a later stage.

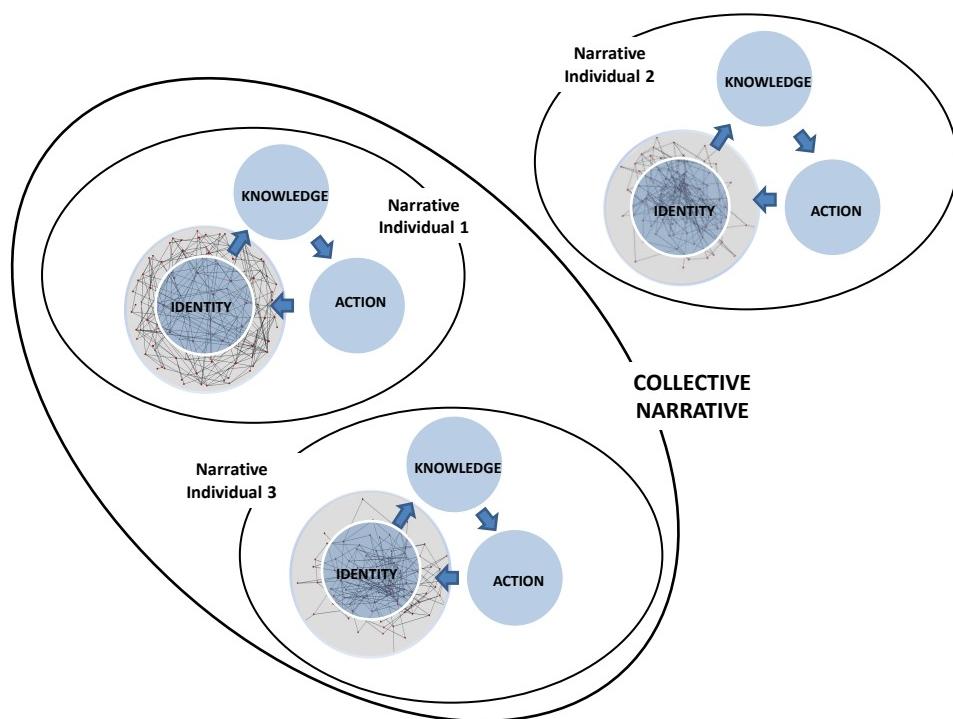


Figure 3: Changing membership of a group over time: compatibility/dissonance of individual narratives with a collective narrative

Dispelling the Myths

Once violent extremism is understood through such a relational framework, it is easy to counter some widely-held beliefs in counterterrorism circles. Among these are: the notion that acts of terrorism can be “predicted,” that there are technologies (such as the Internet) that can be held responsible for radicalization, and that there is a need to counter specific extremist messages. These notions are flawed because radicalization is a temporal- and context-specific outcome: it depends on an individual’s unique position within a configuration of relationships at any given time.

In other words—which helps explaining the failure of terrorism research in finding a definite set of “causes” for terrorism—there are no individual characteristics that by themselves define the profile of a terrorist [33] and there are no fixed structural conditions under which terrorism will arise. As has been noted, individuals who turn to terrorism might be unemployed, excluded, alienated, vulnerable young people, but they could also be members from the educated, middle class, and even come from the well-off class [34]. Extremism can develop in closed societies [35] as well as in open, democratic ones [36, 37]. What matters is that terrorist action is the outcome of an identity and a corresponding narrative that legitimize violent action. Where and when the constellation of relationships—both real and imagined—that will support the formation of that violence-prone identity will materialize simply cannot be anticipated with mathematical certainty without reference to the specific milieu in which these develop.

The role of the Internet should not be dismissed: of course it has changed our society, the way politics work, and it has also influenced the dynamics of social mobilization [38]. This technology offers the opportunity to reach out to potential supporters internationally and to fundraise more effectively, as social movements (Greenpeace, Amnesty International or Occupy, for instance), activists (like Anonymous), and charities (such as Oxfam) know very well. However, the role of the Internet in the extremism phenomenon—as in any

political mobilization—is relative: in the mountains of Afghanistan—where there is no electricity and most of the population is illiterate—the terrorists’ narrative is not conveyed through the Internet but rather by *shabnamah* (night letters) and leaflets affixed to walls, communications which are often handwritten [39].

It is frequently argued that multimedia material available online is more “radicalizing” than text. For instance, Anthony Lemieuex and Robert Nill have underlined the role of music in jihadi propaganda, particularly in leading individuals exposed to the lyrics to ‘engage in deeper processing and consideration’ [40]. But no message is either ‘convincing’ or able to connect at a deeper emotional level with an individual in and by itself. Whichever information and messages one receives, these will be filtered through the lenses of an individual’s identity and point of view from a specific “corner” of the social world. The very fact of being “convincing” or “moving” is relative and depending on the relationship between the incoming message and the pre-existing individual narrative. Individuals who have become extremists do not necessarily need to be exposed to extremist material to reinforce their conviction and perhaps take violent action. They can just watch the news and find confirmation of their interpretation of what happens in the world around them. For example Nizar Trabelsi, accused of plotting to bomb a military base in Belgium in the name of Al Qaeda, stated during his trial that he had decided to carry out the attack after seeing pictures of a Palestinian baby girl who was killed in the Gaza Strip in 2001 [41]. It is not clear where Trabelsi exactly saw those pictures. Yet, it is very likely that many more people (perhaps even tens or hundreds of thousands in case they had been broadcast over the daily mainstream media news) must have been exposed to the same images and did not become “radicalized” by them.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, it is not necessary to be exposed to radical ideas to become a radical. The Norwegian Anders Breivik, for example, developed much of his extremist manifesto *2083: A European Declaration of Independence* [42], on the basis of quotes from harmless sociology books that can be found in any library. Ed Husain, a former British Islamist, as he recalls in his memoir *The Islamist*, became interested in political Islam by reading a textbook on religion in school [43]. These are good examples of the creativity of members of audiences in actively interpreting messages: both Breivik and Husain independently drew their own extremist conclusions from non-radical materials to which countless other individuals, who did not turn into violent extremists, had also been exposed to.

Counter-Terrorism Lessons

The implications for counter-terrorism are that “we” cannot re-write “their” narrative. Instead, “we” might want to learn from social movements’ and charities’ public communications campaigns—an example is the viral fundraising video by British teenager Stephen Sutton, who in the summer of 2014 raised over 5 million pounds for the Teenage Cancer Trust [44]. Charities, to continue with this example, are learning to operate in an increasingly unpredictable environment. While they cannot know what is going to be “liked” by the public and what will “go viral” in an increasingly message-saturated society, they understand that most audiences generally do not “buy” artificially-packaged top-down messages. Many organizations have therefore adapted and transformed from being uni-directional broadcasters of messages to lose networks that facilitate the distribution of creative content by grassroots activists.

Ultimately, although communication is crucial, it is important to understand that the message is not all. “We” can communicate as effectively as we like, but the consistency between words and deeds is of paramount importance. Just to illustrate this with a couple of examples: could the very existence of the Guantanamo Bay prison and the killing of civilians resulting from the increasing use of drones in Muslim countries be undermining “our” own narrative? How credible, in the light of what is happening in Cuba and Afghanistan,

is the claim that Western countries are democracies that value individual freedoms and human rights? Reality can in the end not be permanently concealed behind rhetorical makeovers.

Again, because any individual interprets incoming information according to a personal narrative that is rooted in one's network of relationships at any given time, targeting extremists with the "right" message is, to put it bluntly, a waste of time. I am not arguing that communicating with extremist is not useful or has no impact: receiving information (*if* one is listening to, that is) always leads to some form of effect. However, do not expect to de-radicalize extremists by merely "messaging" them. As political campaigners know, there is no point in trying to convince people who are very interested in politics about whom to vote for: these individuals have already made up their minds. The same applies to extremists: they too have already decided. That is why messages, if at all used, should target not the extremists, but those who are *around* them—the extremists' non-radical network of relationships. In other words: if you can change an extremist's network (and the narrative that is embedded in it), then you also gradually change the extremist's identity—to a point perhaps in which the person is no longer an extremist.

Conclusion

To sum up: it is not possible to predict acts of terrorism; there is no simple formula that can tell when and where terrorism will arise. There are also no messages, however perfectly crafted, that can, by themselves alone, neutralise violent extremism. However, in each single local context, through community-based approaches and long-term engagement, it is possible to gain an insight into the local narratives and the networks such narratives arise from. Therefore we have to ask: What is the identity of the local community? How do its members see themselves? Who are the "relevant others" of that community? The establishment over time of radical and extremist identities through ideas and discourses can be detected. By being part of a community, it is also possible to engage with the non-radical networks that are around an extremist core. Such a community-based approach and close attention to the consistency between our narrative (words) and our policies (deeds) are in the end the most effective tools against extremism.

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Notes

- [1] 'Some authors refer to "violent radicalisation" in order to emphasize the violent outcome and distinguish the process from non-violent forms of "radical thinking" (Stevens, T. and P. R. Neumann (2009) "Countering Online Radicalization: A Strategy for Action" (London: ICSR/Community Security Trust), p. 10).
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[5] Archetti, C. (2012) *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

[6] Just to provide a couple of examples, David Cameron has recently stated that the fight against ISIL is 'a battle against a poisonous ideology' (Cameron, D. (2014) "David Cameron: Isil poses a direct and deadly threat to Britain," *The Sunday Telegraph*, 16 August, available from:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/11038121/David-Cameron-Isil-poses-a-direct-and-deadly-threat-to-Britain.html>; British members of Parliament Hazel Blears and Julian Lewis have criticized the way in which intelligence services have failed to neutralise the ideology that 'infects' extremists (Blears, H. and J. Lewis (2014) "Jihadists Need to Be Treated Like Nazis," *The Times*, 27 August).

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[13] For example, a US Presidential Task Force report states that 'The United States should devote far more resources to countering radical extremist messages on the Internet, where the self-radicalization process is spreading and accelerating' (Presidential Task Force (2009) *Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, p. 17). The opening sentence of a Congressional Research Service (CRS) report reads: 'The Internet is used by international insurgents, jihadists, and terrorist organizations as a tool for radicalization and recruitment, a method of propaganda distribution, a means of communication, and ground for training' (Theohary, C. A. and J. Rollins (2011) *Terrorist Use of the Internet: Information Operations in Cyberspace*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, R41674, available from: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R41674.pdf>, p. 2).

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[17] Ibid., p. 262.

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